

VENONA and China December 11

The VENONA Project, begun by the Army Security Agency and continued by NSA, looked at Soviets codes and ciphers beginning in World War II (1939-1945); the successful solution after the war provided a treasure trove of information about Soviet espionage activity inside the United States. As a case in point, the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb in August 1949, earlier than anticipated, in part because it stole U.S. atomic secrets (the United States dropped its atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945); we discovered this information loss from VENONA decrypts but, unfortunately, too late to plug the leaks of secret data.

Yet, though the information was from decrypting Soviet espionage messages, the topics covered in the project were hardly limited to the Soviets. VENONA, for example, included information about China, which was an ally of the United States in the war against Japan at the time. China was then ruled by the Chiang Kaishek-led Nationalists, who had a shaky truce with Mao Tsetung's Communists. When the war with Japan ended in 1945, a full-fledged civil war between the two sides erupted, resulting in an eventual Communist victory and the creation of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. According to a November 21, 1944, VENONA message to Moscow from the United States, the new U.S. Ambassador to China—Brigadier General Patrick Hurley—was hostile to the Chinese Communists.



Silvermaster sitting in front of microphones as he testifies

The accusations against Hurley were by Nathan Gregory Silvermaster, an economist for the U.S. War Production Board, who also headed a major Soviet spy ring in Washington, D.C. Silvermaster reported that when Hurley recently visited the Chinese Communist 8th Army Headquarters, he had avowed his friendship. Silvermaster, however, warned Moscow that Hurley was not to be trusted, that he was a stooge of Chiang Kaishek. Chou

Enlai, the chief negotiator for the Communists, furthermore, was to be alerted to this effect.* Silvermaster opined that even the U.S. State Department considered Hurley's views to be at odds with actual State Department policy.

Hurley, a decorated World War I hero and former secretary of war, was an unfortunate choice for the position. Born in the Choctaw nation in Indian Territory, Hurley let out a Choctaw war whoop when he met Mao for the first time (the war whoops would apparently continue aperiodically). Indeed, the job may have been too difficult for him, with State Department Chinese experts consistently questioning his suitability, competence, and sanity. He had problems, for example, with Chinese names, pronouncing Mao Tsetung as "Moose Dung," while Chiang Kaishek was Mr. Shek (Chiang was his surname). But Silvermaster's viewpoint of Hurley was apparently accurate—he tended to side with Chiang against the Communists. Mao reportedly considered Hurley to have been a buffoon.

The November 21 message, as did other VENONA communications, used codenames. Silvermaster was "Robert" and the State Department was "Bank." The Hurley message, for the record, was addressed to Viktor, that is, Lieutenant General Pavel Fitin, the Moscow-based head of the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) Foreign Intelligence Section.

This particular decrypt did not say why Silvermaster believed what he believed about Hurley. The CCH also can't be sure that the information was ever passed to Chou.

* Chiang Kaishek, Mao Tsetung and Chou Enlai are also sometimes rendered as Jiang Jieshi, Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai, respectively.

Sources: www.nsa.gov (Venona Documents, November 1944, 21 November); background information on Patrick Hurley and Nathan Gregory Silvermaster

508 CAPTION: a mustachioed man sitting scowling behind a bank of microphones, as if ready to give testimony.